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Dancing the Image: Complicity, Responsibility and Spectatorship

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Introduction

In *Giving an Account of Oneself* (2005) as well as in *Precarious Life* (2004), Judith Butler theorizes the notions of ethical responsibility and risk in relation to a subject who is not self-grounding, and who can never give a coherent and final account of herself. Butler's understanding of subjects as fundamentally vulnerable, fundamentally "given over" to each other's mercy, forms the basis of what she calls "collective responsibility" (2004, 29). Prevalent responses to injury, such as rage or guilt ("bad conscience"), work against such responsibility as they withdraw the subject into narcissism and foreclose the primary relation to alterity (2004, 29; 2005, 99-100). As an alternative, Butler offers vulnerability to (and risk of) loss as primary tools for "living otherwise" (2005, 100). "Mindfulness of this vulnerability," Butler argues, "can become the basis of claims for non-military political solutions, just as denial of this vulnerability through a[n institutionalized] fantasy of mastery . . . can fuel the instruments of war" (2004, 29). She ends her contemplation on the conditions of accountability with the oft-quoted following words:

Perhaps most importantly, we must recognize that ethics requires us to risk ourselves precisely at moments of unknowingness, when what forms us diverges from what lies before us, when our willingness to become undone in relation to others constitutes our chance of becoming human. To be undone by another is a primary necessity, an anguish, to be sure, but also a chance—to be addressed, claimed, bound to what is not me, but also to be moved, to be prompted to act, to address myself elsewhere, and so to vacate the self-sufficient "I" as a kind of possession. If we speak and try to give an account from this place, we will not be irresponsible, or, if we are, we will surely be forgiven. (2005, 136)

For Butler, then, being open to the risk of loss by allowing oneself to be undone by others, is fundamental to the practice of ethical responsibility.

In this article I would like to offer a specific elaboration on the concepts of responsibility, risk and loss in relation to the notion of complicity. The loss that I will analyze below is the loss of an ethical self-image, and the Other to which the self is given over in this account will be one's own repudiated alter ego. I further wish to consider Butler's call for ethical responsibility in relation to debates on the production, circulation, and reception of images of violence, in the specific context of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. I will place Butler's thought in dialogue with the work of visual culture scholars Nicholas Mirzoeff (2011) and Gil Hochberg (2015), who in different ways address resistance strategies to power structures that unevenly distribute the right to look and/or to be seen. Butler's postulation of becoming undone when facing another, addressed in relation to the politics of the visual, offers a pertinent contribution to existing literature in the field.

My inquiry takes place in the form of a close reading; an exploration of *Archive*, an hour-long performance by Israeli dancer and choreographer Arkadi Zaides (2014), in which the artist dances to sounds and images from the video archive of B'Tselem, the Israeli Information Centre for Human Rights in the Occupied Territories. Founded in 1989, B'Tselem is an NGO that produces documentations and reports on human rights violations in the West Bank (including East Jerusalem) and the Gaza Strip (B'Tselem, n.d.). In 2007, the organization launched its "Camera Distribution Project," distributing video cameras and providing citizen-journalist trainings to Palestinian residents of the West Bank, East Jerusalem, and the Gaza Strip, where tensions are high and clashes between Palestinian residents, Israeli settlers, and border police are commonplace. Since its inception, the project has proved to be extremely influential, and footage shot by the project's volunteers played a major role in generating both national and international public attention for cases of human rights violations and abuse (B'Tselem 2017).¹

The Camera Distribution Project video archive is available to the public. It grows on a daily basis and by now includes thousands of hours of documentation.² With the help of video artists Effi Weiss and Amir Borenstein, Zaides compiled a collection of clips from this archive, that act as visual and conceptual background to his performance. The entire archive

¹ For academic studies of the B'Tselem Camera Distribution Project, see for example Stein 2017, Desai 2015, Miretski and Bachmann 2014, and Kuntsman and Stein 2011.

² A sample of videos from the B'Tselem archive is available online at <https://www.btselem.org/video-channel/camera-project>.

of the Camera Distribution Project is shot from the perspective of Palestinian citizen-journalists, and Zaides's selection is limited to clips that show only Israeli protagonists on screen. This is a crucial detail for understanding the performance, and it is emphasized by Zaides at the beginning of every performance as well as in every interview. Within the context of the B'Tselem Camera Distribution Project, the Israeli bodies that are caught on camera are typically those of settler youth and border police, filmed in order to document or deter violent encounters with Palestinian residents. Accordingly, the clips compiled for *Archive* do not refer to the Israeli body as such, but to a specific Israeli body that is, at the moment of documentation, a (potential) perpetrator. In what follows, I wish to point to the ways in which *Archive*'s hour-long corporeal dialogue with this specific bodily representation resonates with Butler's thoughts on the ethics of risk and responsibility.

(Dis)Identification: Between the West Bank and Tel Aviv

At the start of the performance, Zaides stands facing the audience at the left edge of the stage, that is bare except for a small table with a computer and cables on the left, and two blank screens at the back. Addressing the audience, Zaides offers the following information:

Good evening. Thank you for coming. My name is Arkadi Zaides. I am a choreographer. I am Israeli. For the last fifteen years, I have been living in Tel Aviv. The West Bank is twenty kilometers away from Tel Aviv. The films that you are about to watch were filmed in the West Bank. All the people that you see in these clips are Israelis, like myself. The clips were selected from the video archive of an organization called B'Tselem.³

After these introductory notes, the translator leaves the stage, and Zaides turns his back to the audience, fiddles with the computer and switches on the two screens with a remote control. The screens are synchronized: the larger, more central one presents audio-visual footage from the archive, and the smaller, more peripheral one offers contextual information, including each video's archival number, the name of the photographer, location, date, and short description of the event. The clips vary in quality and content, from an extremely blurry image accompanied by shouts, to a bird's-eye view on a demonstration or gathering, to (closer

³ The following description of *Archive* is based on video documentation of a general rehearsal of the performance's debut at Festival D'Avignon, Avignon, France, on July 7, 2014 (Zaides 2014) and on my own experience of the performance at the Parktheater, Eindhoven, the Netherlands, on September 3, 2016.

to the end of the performance) documentation of stone throwing, border police actions, the chasing and scattering of a herd of sheep, and the burning of fields. Voices heard in the footage, in Arabic and Hebrew, are left untranslated, decipherable (and distinguishable) in this sense only to some.

Zaides approaches the screens carefully at first, positioning himself explicitly as a viewer. Holding a remote control in his hand, he manifests both his distance from and authority over the images, deciding when a clip will be repeated or changed (figure 1). A few minutes into the performance, he freezes the image, replays it, and begins to move with it as if for the first time, learning the movements of one of the clips' protagonists (figure 2). From here onwards, the audience becomes witness to a journey of bodily exploration. At first, Zaides struggles to find exact positions; with time, his movements become more smooth and secure. He follows different figures within every clip, and it is not always clear who is his referent. Most clips are played more than once, and with each replay Zaides absorbs the movements further: he shadows the figures at first, mirrors their movements later, and then breaks free from the screen and repeats the learned movements all across the stage. At times, one could argue that there are multiple dancers on stage, as Zaides's movements duet with the screened figures, who are themselves choreographed through repetition, freeze frames, and backwards-play (figure 3). At certain points in the performance, both screens turn blank and Zaides repeats the movements unaccompanied by visual mediation.

As the performance progresses, the chosen clips present more overt acts of aggression and Zaides's reaction is less hesitant and more absorbed, extending also to verbal utterances, echoing calls to "kill him" or "move away, move away!" in Hebrew accompanied by enthused movements. While there are moments of rest, overall tension is built to a point where Zaides breaks into an ecstatic dance, consumed by the movement and sound that he is now a part of. Then, at the very end of the performance, as a sort of epilogue, Zaides returns to his initial viewing position next to the computer, at the left edge of the stage. Panting, he watches two film scenes where the documented figures (settler children in one, a soldier in the other) are aware of, and respond to, the presence of a camera, returning once more the staged situation to the realm of spectatorship (figure 4).⁴

There are various ways in which *Archive* can be understood in relation to Butler's critical thought. One trajectory, which I cannot develop fully here, would be to examine Zaides's gestural repetitions as commenting on the discursive and bodily reiterations that

⁴ For a more detailed breakdown of the performance, see Pouillaude 2016, 83-87.

mold the subject (in this case, the Israeli settler male youth) into being. Zaides's gestural performatives are hesitant at first, but gain confidence and velocity with every repetition.⁵ Within the course of the performance, they become inscribed onto the body, naturalized if you will, only to spill over and take control, revealing themselves again as foreign to it. Embodiment is apprehended here as an emphatically cultural process of subjectivation in which "collective behaviors and beliefs, acquired through acculturation, are rendered individual and 'lived' at the level of the body" (Noland 2010, 9). The body, in turn, is presented simultaneously as "a subject's most intimate experience, and her or his most inescapable form of public constitution" (Sturm 2014, 20).

A second, related trajectory, has to do with the way *Archive* stages the attempt to give an account of oneself in a layered, relational, and fragmentary manner. Zaides's initial self-grounding exposition, "I am a choreographer. I am Israeli," spills over onto his onstage persona, while not completely conflating with it. Neither particularly transparent nor entirely fictional, the singular body dancing on stage is always and already discursively compound (Sturm 2014, 62). This complexity, in turn, feeds into Zaides's intricate relation with the bodies that look at him from the audience, and with the bodies that he faces on the screen. The seemingly constative and identificatory statement at the start of the performance, "the people that you see ... are Israelis, like myself," is immediately countered by Zaides's self-positioning as a resident of Tel-Aviv, Israel's left and liberal hub, at a great ideological (if not geographical) distance from the settler population of the West Bank. The performance's essence emerges from this contradiction in terms, and foregrounds a narrative of initial disidentification between seer and seen that is gradually put to the test through persistent and active iterations. Shifting between the position of an observing (liberal, Tel-Avivian Israeli) body and an observed (West-Bank, settler Israeli) body, Zaides's performing figure metaphorically crosses the lines that separate (dis)identification and identity (Butler 2004, 145-146), offering multiple and unstable accounts of the self.⁶

Significantly, Zaides's position vis-à-vis the screened footage remains ambiguous: he is both implicated by it, and distanced from it. The crux of the performance lies in the straddling of Zaides's staged affiliation with and curiosity towards the documented bodies, and the latter's status as perpetrators by virtue of their documentation. This conflictual

⁵ For an account of gestural performatives in distinction from verbal or discursive ones, see Noland 2010, 21, 194-6.

⁶ "The one with whom I identify," Butler writes, "is not me, and that 'not being me' is the condition of the identification ... This difference internal to identification is crucial, and, in a way, it shows us that disidentification is part of the common practice of identification itself" (2004, 145-146).

relation is sustained throughout the performance by the use of the two synchronized screens, so that Zaides's corporeal study of bodily movements in each clip is never removed from the images' primary status as witnesses to specific (potential or actual) cases of abuse. The gestures of occupation and colonization are in this way never transfigured into decontextualized, abstract movement on stage. Rather, *Archive*'s persistent indictment of the violence that is inscribed in the screened figures' movements, together with Zaides's evident effort to address himself through their image, epitomizes Butler's understanding of the ethics of risk involved in becoming undone in relation to others. Staging an intimate and formative encounter with the violent body on screen, *Archive* vacates the position of a "self-sufficient [ethical] 'I'" (Butler 2005, 136) and foregrounds responsibility as an emphatically collective endeavor.

Politics of Spectatorship: Engaged Fields of Vision

Archive's contribution to discerning the ethics of risk and responsibility takes place within the specific context of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and through a recourse to the politics of spectatorship. Zaides's gestural reiterations, in their conjectures on subjectivity and selfhood, pull the archival image out of its habituated context of the already-known and already-seen. After all, the presented footage does not necessitate exposure as such: similar images of violence (and often more explicit ones) are frequently present in the news as part of the "international media spectacle of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict" (Hochberg 2015, 6). This spectacle materializes within, and contributes to, an overdetermined visual field, involving an extremely uneven distribution of visual rights, in which the Palestinian "condition of radical invisibility [before the law] couples with an extreme inequality with regard to Palestinians' right to look" (Hochberg 2015, 98).⁷

"The right to look" is a term coined by Jacques Derrida in 1985 and picked up by Nicholas Mirzoeff to denote "a claim to a subjectivity that has the autonomy to arrange the relations of the visible and the sayable" (Mirzoeff 2011, 474). Within the context of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the right to look would involve the undermining of Israeli visual dominance, understood as the dominance over the creation, circulation, and interpretation of images (Hochberg 2015, 6). B'Tselem's Camera Distribution Project, from which *Archive* pulls footage, offers audio-visual corroboration of Palestinian narration of events in the face of contradictory official military and governmental accounts. In doing so, it partakes in a

⁷ For a concise, but poignant, example of such invisibility, see Butler 2004, 35-36.

countervisual practice where Palestinian residents are the ones doing the looking, rather than being looked at.⁸

Yet even this mode of emancipated witnessing, however necessary, inadvertently takes part in what Gil Hochberg terms the “global project of rendering Palestinian suffering visible” (2015, 115). Hochberg argues that while countervisual practices are necessary in the face of Israeli visual dominance, they nevertheless contribute to an already saturated and mostly overdetermined, even fetishized, visual field (137). This cautious approach to the political promise of the documentary image is reinforced by Adi Kuntsman and Rebecca Stein’s recent study of Israeli social media channels, exposing that the proliferation of images of human rights violations in the occupied territories has led not to a change in Israeli public policy, but to a change in the way Israeli society deals with and manages the “public secret” of the occupation and its effects (Kuntsman and Stein 2015, 14-15, 88-89). Specifically, the challenge that the Camera Distribution Project presented to the general public in its unmasking of daily human rights violations has been dealt with by “a politics of digital suspicion,” read as ideologically motivated and thus instantly denounced (Stein 2017, 61; Kuntsman and Stein 2011, n.p.).⁹

Hochberg finds promise in artistic expressions that refuse to provide visual evidence, or in her words, “refuse to replicate and render visible a reality that is always already seen through the dominant gaze” (2015, 101). *Archive* clearly doesn’t fit this description, but it offers an alternative route to circumventing a visibility within which knowledge starts and ends with the gaze of a distant viewer and her settled, privileged political vantage point. In line with Butler’s understanding of the ethical subject as one that is given over to others, Zaides performatively gives himself over to the images he faces. His emphatically corporeal response to the footage offers an alternate, entangled mode of image consumption, not through the eye but through the body, not through representation but through re-enactment. The condition of the dominant gaze that, following Hochberg, persists even in cases of countervisual tactics, is challenged here through the metaphorical lack of (physical, emotional, and ethical) distance that needs to be kept in any act of visual interpretation. In reducing the gap between the spectating self and the spectated other, and in accepting the

⁸ The term “countervisual” should be understood as the visual equivalent to a “counter narrative;” it does not oppose the domination of the visual as such, but the authority of a specific (always and already politically inflected) presentation and interpretation of the visual (Mirzoeff 2011, 474, 476).

⁹ In different contexts, Butler makes parallel arguments regarding the partial essence of fields of vision, see for example her interpretation of the Rodney King trial video evidence as one that is embedded within a “racially saturated field of visibility” (1993, 15) as well as her analysis of modes of effacement that occur, counterintuitively, through representation (2005, 147-148; 2009, 63-100).

images' invitation to imagine oneself otherwise, *Archive* unsettles the spectator's supposedly disengaged field of vision.

During the course of this journey, the audience is not spared; it cannot be, if the aim of the performance is, as I read it, to open up to alterity as a basis for collective responsibility. When Zaides draws attention to his use of the remote control, or when he stands bluntly with his back to the public that is watching his performance, blocking their view, looking with them at the images on the screen, he reiterates their perspective and function. Only later in the show does Zaides's body interact and then fuse with the documented bodies, undoing the distance between onstage seer and seen; the starting point stages a familiar scene of zapping through bad news. Zaides's corporeal journey into the screened archival footage is thus not *presented to* a distant audience, but rather *stands for* their own involvement with the figures onscreen.

In this way, *Archive* broadens the thrust of its argument beyond the confines of internal Israeli identity politics. It stages complicity and vulnerability as inherent to the act of spectatorship as such, and asserts a "fundamental dependency," in Butler's terms, between all bodies present, that has the potential to interrupt the audience's self-conscious account of themselves, Israelis or not, as distant from the bodies on display (Butler 2004, xii, 22-23).¹⁰ By way of denying the (critical) spectator a fantasy of mastery over an image's dominant signification, which in this case stages the body of the perpetrator as distinct and distant from oneself, Zaides foregrounds his, and his audience's, accountability.

Collective Responsibility: Addressing Oneself Otherwise

Zaides's refusal to distance himself (and, with him, his audience) from the protagonists on stage and on the screen echoes Butler's understanding of the ethics of risk and responsibility, and answers her call for awareness to "the fundamental sociality of embodied life, the ways in which we are, from the start and by virtue of being a bodily being, already given over, beyond ourselves, implicated in lives that are not our own" (2004, 28). This is done in part through a recourse to the politics of visibility, by means of an aesthetic approach that refutes the notion of a disembodied eye as well as that of a distinct self-sufficient "I" as a kind of possession

¹⁰ Specifically, with regards to an international audience, Hochberg warns that "not all violence becomes easily visible to external viewers, and that some modes of violence systematically continue to fall out of sight" (2015, 13). She refers to images of non-spectacular, "slow violence" that are part of everyday life under Israeli occupation, and that may appear harmless, completely invisible as images of violence. The visual repertoire presented in *Archive* combines mediations of both spectacular and mundane violence, advancing a more porous distribution of visual sensibilities in this regard.

(Butler 2005, 136). Most poignantly, *Archive*'s focus on the figure of the perpetrator as part of the social fabric that constitutes the self, underscores the recognition of one's complicitous implication in mechanisms of violence and their mediation, as a crucial step towards a conceptualization of collective responsibility. Such recognition of complicity, *when, and only when in tandem with the notion of an incoherent, incomplete and opaque subjectivity*, may circumscribe the debilitating effects of narcissistic shame or indignation, in much the same way as the recognition of an emphatically collective form of vulnerability may circumscribe the debilitating effects of rage or guilt, that would close off to alterity (Butler 2004, 29; 2005, 99-100).

In *Archive*, the body that does the looking and the body that is looked at are both distinct and indivisible; separate and conjoined. This is a staged invitation to open up to alterity, to "what is not me," not in order to redistribute blame, but rather to give an account of oneself from a position that cannot be comfortably located on stable, distant moral ground. Put differently, the realization of one's body as socially constituted, and the understanding of the self as always and already given over to others, are underscored in *Archive* as ethically productive not only when they lead to the refusal to resolve vulnerability too quickly into violence, but also when they engender a refusal to locate violence as categorically foreign to one's self.¹¹

Zaides begins his performance as a viewer of human rights violations in the West Bank, and along the way becomes (stands for) that very image. In between, there is a brief moment where the screen, as a boundary between the seer and the seen, is undone. In this moment, Zaides stands so close to the screen that his body both blocks the view and replaces it, as the image is projected on his back (figure 5). In this synthesis of the seeing subject and the subject that is seen, *Archive* points to the vulnerability of any one of us to lose ourselves to perpetrators who seem to be safely positioned "on the other side" of the screen. However somber, I find *Archive* full of promise, as it opens up a chance, to come back to Butler, to be

¹¹ In this respect, it is important to attend more precisely to the place of forgiveness within the process of collective responsibility, hinted at by the very last sentence of Butler's quote cited at the beginning of this essay. When understood in relation to guilt, or bad consciousness, which are forms of narcissism that close off to alterity (2004, 138), the wish for absolution that is encapsulated in the notion of forgiveness seems to "harness and exploit the very impulses [it] seek[s] to curb" (2005, 100). Butler, however, employs the term forgiveness against the grain, and in clear distinction from absolution, as an act of acceptance of one's opaque, relational, and collectively-formed identity, that works *against* socially enforced modes of individualism (2005, 135). Indeed, following the broader trajectory of Butler's thought, it is clear that a crucial aspect of the mobilization of non-violent ethics and politics involves coming to terms with the impossibility, even futility, of absolution. *Archive*'s emphasis on the self as partially constituted in convivial relation to violence resonates this trajectory, and can be understood as "forgiving" only in the sense of acceptance of one's socially-constituted culpability, devoid of excuse or exoneration.

moved and to be prompted to act, to address oneself otherwise, in ways that are more responsible and less indignant than what the current political vocabulary of the (Israeli) left may allow.¹²

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Figure 1. Zaidés positioned explicitly as a viewer [Bilal Tamimi, A-nabi saleh – Demonstration, A-nabi saleh, 2010]. Screen capture from general rehearsal documentation (05:40), *Festival D’Avignon*, July 2014.



Figure 2. Shadowing depicted figures for the first time [Awani D'awa, settlers fighting against the border police, Hebron, 2007]. Screen capture from general rehearsal documentation (8:02), *Festival D'Avignon*, July 2014.

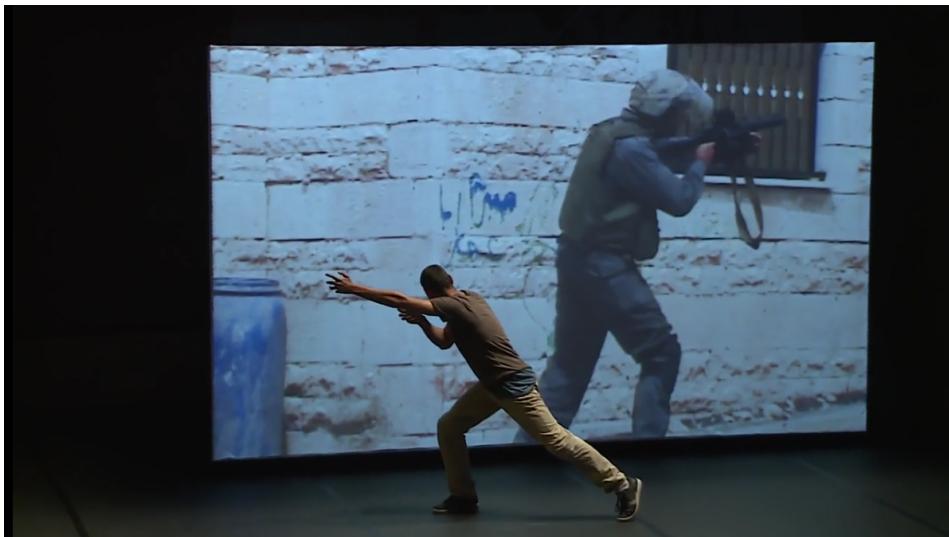


Figure 3. Mirroring depicted figures on screen [Mustafa Eilam, soldier shoots tear gas at protestors, A-nabi saleh, 2010]. Screen capture from general rehearsal documentation (16:54), *Festival D'Avignon*, July 2014.

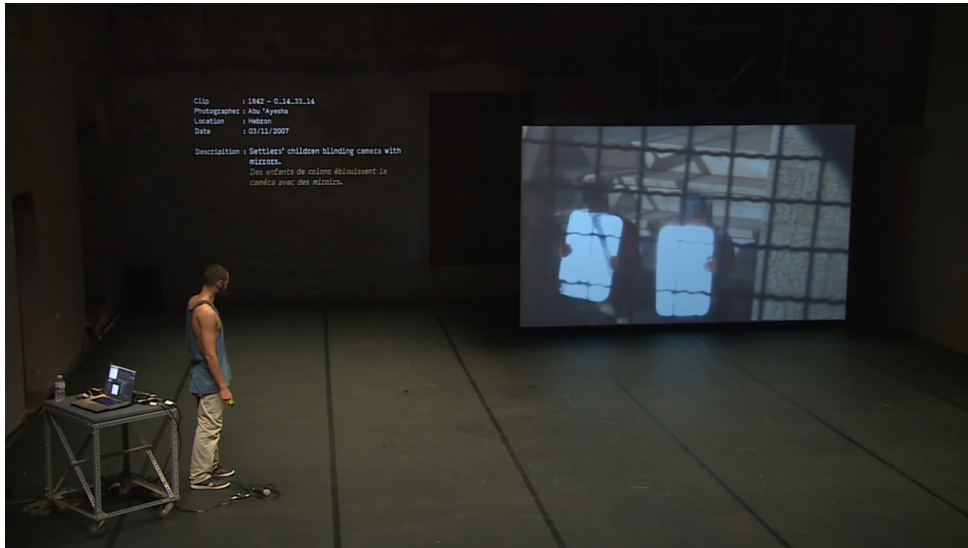


Figure 4. Close to the end of the performance, returning to the position of a spectator [Abu Ayesha, Settlers' children blinding camera with mirrors. Hebron, 2007]. Screen capture from general rehearsal documentation (1:06:15), *Festival D'Avignon*, July 2014.



Figure 5. Image partly projected on Zaides. [photographer unknown, group of face-covered settlers with slings to throw stones, 2009]. Screen capture from general rehearsal documentation (13:09), *Festival D'Avignon*, July 2014.